

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Wednesday, 22nd March, 2023.

Present:- Councillors Gahir (Chair), Matloob (Vice-Chair), Akbar, Bedi and Kaur

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Ali, Hulme and Swindlehurst

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Bal, Basra, M. Malik and S. Malik

PART I

14. Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

15. Minutes of the Meetings held on 15th February 2023 and 23rd February 2023

Resolved – That the minutes of the meetings held on 15th and 23rd February 2023 be approved as a correct record.

16. Member Questions

No Member Questions had been submitted.

17. Draft Annual Scrutiny Report 2022/23

The Committee received and reviewed the draft Annual Scrutiny Report for 2022/23 and was asked to recommend the document to full Council.

The Chair summarised the report and highlighted that it had been a transitional year for scrutiny, with 'business as usual' continuing in terms of scrutiny of key aspects of the Council's budget and recovery as well as implementing the scrutiny review so that a new structure could be in place at the start of the next municipal year. Highlights of the year had included the work of the task and finish groups and it had been widely agreed that this model had been valuable and would be good practice to be continued in 2023/24. Budget scrutiny had been very detailed during the year with every budget saving coming to the committee or relevant scrutiny panel to test and challenge each proposals.

The Chair thanked members of the committee and officers that had supported scrutiny for their work throughout the year. He emphasised the importance of recruiting to the vacant scrutiny officer post so that the Overview & Scrutiny function had the dedicated resource and expertise that it required to fully contribute to the Council's recovery. Overall, the Chair stated that 2022/23 had provided a solid base for further scrutiny improvement during the next

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year and he requested that the committee endorse the report and recommend it to Council.

Members of the committee each commented on the key learnings from the year that should be taken forward as part of the next stage of the review. A summary of these issues which had been discussed in detail at the recent annual review and work programming session were included in the Annual Report. The Leader of the Council thanked the committee for its important work during the year and commented that the Cabinet had always valued recommendations and input from the committee and panels.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Annual Report was endorsed and it was agreed to recommend it to Council.

Resolved –

- (a) That the draft Scrutiny Annual Report 2022/23 be endorsed; and
- (b) That it be Recommend to Council that the Scrutiny Annual Report 2022/23 be noted.

18. Best Value Intervention - Commissioners' Second Report and Government Response

The Committee received a report that set out the current position with the Government intervention, which included the most recent 6-month report of the Commissioners submitted to the Secretary of State; the Secretary of State's letter to the Council in response; and an update from the Council following receipt of the two letters.

It was noted that the Commissioners' letter which set out their view of the progress of the Council had been submitted to the Secretary of State on 22nd December 2022 covering the period of the first year of the intervention. The Secretary of State had subsequently written to the Council, and published the Commissioners letter, on 16th March 2023.

It had been hoped that the Lead Commissioner would have been able to attend the Committee. However, it was noted that the Lead Commissioner, Max Caller, had left that role on 1st March 2023 and the Finance Commissioner Margaret Lee had resigned on 12th March. The remaining Commissioner, Gavin Jones, was not able to attend the meeting. It was anticipated that new Commissioners would be appointed in due course.

The Leader of the Council, Executive Director of Strategy & Improvement, Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer were all present and answered the Committees questions in relation to the current position on the intervention.

The Committee expressed significant concern that the Commissioners letter of December 2022 stated that the progress the Council was making in a

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number of key areas was too slow and Commissioners said "...it was impossible...to conclude that SBC will be a viable unitary authority at the end of the current or a potentially extended Direction period." Members highlighted their disappointment that as no Commissioners were present as had been hoped they could not ask questions to better understand the basis for this assertion.

The Leader commented that the pace of delivery of improvement and recovery plans had accelerated significantly in the past three months since the Commissioners letter had been submitted. A meeting had been held recently with the Minister, Lee Rowley MP, which had given the Council the opportunity to detail the more recent progress that had been made. A full, permanent Director tier had been put in place towards the end of 2022 and this gave the Council the senior officer capacity and leadership required. It was noted that very significant progress had been made in the first year of the intervention, particularly stabilising the financial position and putting in place a clear financial recovery plan, including the asset disposal programme which was ahead of schedule. The Leader recognised that progress in other areas needed to be accelerated including culture change and the response to the recruitment issues that led to the extended Direction after the Commissioners first report in 2022. He said the next year would be key for the Council's recovery but if the Council could deliver its budget, with £22m of savings this year, and continue to deliver the asset disposal programme it would be in a significantly stronger position. The Leader thanked the outgoing Commissioners, Max Caller and Margaret Lee, for their support to the Council in the past year, particularly in supporting the immediate priority of financial repair.

The Committee had a wide ranging discussion about the issues raised including why there had been a delay between the submission of the Commissioners letter in December 2022 and its publication in March 2023. Scrutiny members were concerned that it was not therefore a fully up to date assessment of the Council's position. It was responded that publication of the Commissioners letter was entirely a matter for Commissioners and for DLUHC. The Leader highlighted that it was important the Council could demonstrate the progress it was making and the new reporting processes put in place in recent months would help provide this. He stated that no one was more committed to the Council's recovery than elected Members and emphasised that the Council had to 'own' its recovery and improvement to show that it could manage and operate effectively without intervention as soon as possible, recognising the scale of the challenge the Council still faced.

Members asked a number of questions about delayed completion of audits since 2018/19 and the serious weaknesses identified in the re-written 2018/19 external audit which had recently been published. The Leader recognised the serious weaknesses in financial management and practice reflected in the 2018/19 accounts and commented that similar issues would also be found in 2019/20 and 2020/21 as the issues were not identified by the Council until the new finance team came in during 2021. It was expected that audits for the

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financial years from 2021/22 onwards would start to show the improvements made to financial management as had been regularly reported to Members in the Finance Action Plan updates to each Council meeting.

The Executive Director Finance & Commercial/Section 151 Officer described the finance culture she hoped to promote in Slough as the Council sought to move to a 'business as usual' approach similar to all local authorities. The model was that finance was an all Council effort with shared responsibility across managers and staff in all directorates, supported by a strong finance business partner function.

The Committee discussed the reported lack of progress on culture change and the Leader and the Executive Director Strategy & Improvement summarised the work taking place on organisational transformation and said a dedicated programme group was leading this activity, although it was acknowledged that culture change took time and could be hard to define and measure. Members asked that an update on the culture change work be considered for the 2023/24 scrutiny work programme.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Committee noted the update and agreed that scrutiny had an important role to play in the 2023/24 in supporting the Council's recovery.

Resolved – That the contents of the Commissioners' report to the Secretary of State, the subsequent letter to SBC from DLUHC, and the report by SBC in light of the progress reports which Scrutiny had received since the Commissioners' letter was submitted to government be noted.

19. Members Attendance Record 2022/23

Resolved – That the record of Members' attendance be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.31 pm and closed at 8.30 pm)